



**UNITED STATES ENVIRONMENTAL PROTECTION AGENCY
REGION 8**

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January 18, 2008

Ref: EPR-N

Mary H. Peterson
Forest Supervisor
2468 Jackson Street
Laramie, Wyoming 82701

Re: Thunder Basin National Grassland
Prairie Dog Management Strategy
and Land and Resource Management
Plan Amendment #3 Draft EIS

Dear Ms. Peterson,

The Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) Region 8 has reviewed the Thunder Basin National Grassland Prairie Dog Management Strategy and Land and Resource Management Plan Amendment #3 Draft EIS (DEIS). Our comments are provided in accordance with our authorities under the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA), 42 U.S.C. 4231, and Section 309 of the Clean Air Act. The U.S. Forest Service proposes to implement a site-specific strategy to manage black-tailed prairie dogs to support reintroduction of the endangered black-footed ferret on Thunder Basin National Grassland (TBNG). The implementation strategy will also maintain populations of other associated species at prairie dog colonies while reducing unwanted colonization of prairie dogs on adjoining lands along national grassland boundaries. The Forest Service proposes to amend the Thunder Basin Land and Resource Management Plan (LRMP) as needed to support the site-specific strategy and to modify the boundary of the black-footed ferret reintroduction area.

The amendments would change the standards and guidelines allowing loss of black-footed ferret habitat as a result of prairie dog poisoning without replacement, and allow use of rodenticides (grain baits) on prairie dog colonies that are expanding on to neighboring private lands where they are not wanted and/or where the Forest Service determines they are not needed for habitat for prairie dogs, black-footed ferrets or other associated species. The language in the LRMP is revised from not allowing any reduction of suitability of an area as black-footed ferret reintroduction habitat to a less protective standard, allowing uses and activities in the reintroduction area that do not reduce habitat below the level needed to support a long-term sustainable black-footed ferret population.

EPA has concerns about the range of alternatives in the document, the impact of the proposed action on the Forest Service's black-footed ferret reintroduction plan and the impact of allowing lethal control of a Forest Service Sensitive Species on the TBNG when population trends show estimated total acres of prairie dog colonies are declining. EPA encourages the Forest Service to consult with the Fish and Wildlife Service to ensure the proposed action supports the Forest Service's goal of maintaining a stable prairie dog population (page 22, Black-Tailed Prairie Dog Conservation Assessment and Strategy).

EPA would also like to see the FEIS analyze a non-lethal management alternative for managing black-tailed prairie dogs that is responsive to landowner concerns and also consistent with Forest Service goals for the species long-term sustainability and the eventual reintroduction of the black-footed ferret. A non-lethal management alternative could include translocating prairie dogs to other sites or constructing barriers to reduce colony expansions.

Based on the procedures EPA uses to evaluate the adequacy of the information and the potential environmental impacts of the proposed action and alternatives in an EIS, EPA rates this DEIS as EC-2 (Environmental Concerns-Insufficient Information). An "EC" signifies that EPA's review of the DEIS has identified potential environmental impacts that should be avoided in order to provide adequate protection of environmental resources. A "2" rating signifies that the DEIS does not contain sufficient information for the EPA to fully assess environmental impacts that should be avoided in order to fully protect the environment. A copy of EPA's rating criteria is attached.

Enclosed are EPA's detailed comments. These comments are intended to help ensure a comprehensive assessment of the project's environmental impacts, adequate public disclosure and an informed decision-making process for alternative selection. If you have any questions or would like to discuss our comments, please contact me at 303-312-6004 or Jody Ostendorf (303-312-7814) of my staff.

Sincerely,

Os b LSv

Larry Svoboda
Director, NEPA Program
Office of Ecosystems Protection and Remediation

**Thunder Basin National Grassland Prairie Dog Management Strategy and Land and
Resource Management Plan Amendment #3**

Detailed Comments

- The FEIS should discuss the impact of the 2007 petition to list the black-tailed prairie dog under the Endangered Species Act on the LRMP amendments and this new prairie dog management direction. As indicated in the Background (page 14), the last time the species was petitioned for listing, the Forest Service prohibited poisoning of prairie dogs pending the US Fish and Wildlife Service's decision on the ESA petition.
- The Forest Service's suitability model for prairie dog habitat classified 148,000 acres (92 percent) of TBNG as suitable habitat (page 15). The Black-Tailed Prairie Dog Conservation Assessment and Strategy for the Thunder Basin National Grassland states that the TBNG encompasses 553,000 acres (page 3). Please clarify this discrepancy in the FEIS.
- The DEIS states that black-footed ferret recovery is directly related to prairie dog conservation on the TBNG (page 22 of The Black-Tailed Prairie Dog Conservation Assessment and Strategy for the Thunder Basin National Grassland). TBNG is one of the most intact national grassland structures in the northern Great Plains and considered a high-priority reintroduction site for the black-footed ferret, which is "the most endangered mammal in North America" (page 49). EPA is concerned that the proposed action allows lethal control of the black-tailed prairie dog, which the ferret completely relies on for its food source, on all but 18,000 acres of "core habitat" (page 18). The DEIS states that the loss of prairie dog colonies on private and state land necessitates large areas of federal land to support prairie dog colonies for black-footed ferret habitat (page 47). Please provide the scientific data supporting management of such minimal acreage for this endangered species, and explain how this is consistent with the Revised Black Footed Ferret Recovery Plan.
- The prairie dog population trend graph (page 67) shows estimated total acres of prairie dog colonies on the TBNG declining dramatically from 1996 to 2007, from 16,589 to 3,243 acres. EPA is concerned about the impact of this downward trend for prairie dogs and other wildlife that depend on them for food, or their burrows for shelter, including the endangered black-footed ferret, burrowing owls, hawks, foxes and others. Black-tailed prairie dogs are a Forest Service Sensitive Species that is already impacted by ungulate grazing, drought, disease and poisoning on private and (most public) land. EPA is concerned about the impact of adding lethal control on public land to the sustainability of this declining species and other wildlife that depend on them. The FEIS should include trend graphs for those associated species where available.
- The DEIS states that because of conflicts with livestock producers, as prairie dogs compete with cattle for forage, there is limited potential for the TBNG to reintroduce black-footed ferrets (page 15). The FEIS should provide more information on the role livestock producers have regarding the success or failure of the TBNG's black-footed ferret recovery plan. The DEIS states that the Forest Service will continue managing

black-tailed prairie dogs on TBNG, and its dedication to eventually reintroduce black-footed ferret recovery within 15 years of the approval of the current LRMP (page 23 of The Black-Tailed Prairie Dog Conservation Assessment and Strategy for the Thunder Basin National Grassland). Please explain why the Forest Service has established a 15 year window of time to begin reintroducing the endangered species.

- The DEIS also states that private landowners near TBNG see prairie dog colonies as unattractive “wasteland” and believe the presence of prairie dogs to be an indictment of their land management (page 25). For that reason they are routinely shot and poisoned on private land. The FEIS should more clearly explain why that is not the most appropriate approach to managing unwanted prairie dog colonies. Why not use lethal control where they are not wanted (private land), and use non-lethal control where they are a protected Sensitive Species (public land)? As stated in our cover letter, EPA would like to see a non-lethal control alternative that is consistent with the Revised Black Footed Ferret Recovery Plan analyzed in the FEIS.
- The ferret family rating total in Figure 11 shows a decline between 1997 and 2002, indicating that there is currently no habitat for black-footed ferrets (page 68). This seems to be the reason the FS did not consult with the Fish and Wildlife Service on this proposed action. The DEIS states this project will have **no effect** (emphasis by the Forest Service) on black-footed ferrets because there will be no direct, indirect or cumulative effects to the species. However, this action will result in increased mortality of that species’ primary food source. As stated in our cover letter, EPA strongly recommends that the Forest Service consult with Fish and Wildlife Service on this plan’s potential to impact prairie dog habitat and thereby the future habitat of the to-be-reestablished endangered black-footed ferrets.